LA FONTAINE'S THEORIES ON THE FABLE AS A LITERARY FORM

*by Philip A. Wadsworth**

> . . . je me suis flatté de l'espérance que si je ne courais dans cette carrière avec succès, on me donnerait au moins la gloire de l'avoir ouverte.
>
> —La Fontaine, preface of 1668

The words of La Fontaine display a mixture of winning modesty and well-founded pride. In presenting his first six books of fables to the public in 1668 he had tried his best to please an exacting audience, but of course he could not count upon achieving this goal. At least he could claim that his project had the virtue of novelty. There had been many mediocre imitators and translators of Aesop in France—notably Haudent and Corrozet in the sixteenth century—but La Fontaine was the first gifted poet to offer a substantial collection of fables in French verse. One thinks of Du Bellay's domestication of the Italian sonnet or of the *Discours de la méthode* in which French replaced Latin as the language of philosophy. La Fontaine's innovation was to take rather primitive fable material, most of it in prose, much in Latin, and enrich it with all the resources of French poetry.

The venture turned out to be an immediate and enduring success. La Fontaine's fables have become so widely admired, so thoroughly accepted as literary classics, that we are inclined to forget the awkward little stories which inspired them. Moreover, his fables have a naturalness, an air of spontaneity, which tends to conceal all the effort which necessarily entered into them. Their conception and composition have of course been studied by a number of modern scholars, but the essential aesthetic problem was described most concisely, perhaps, by an eighteenth-century *philosophe*, Naigeon, in his tribute to La Fontaine written in 1774:

> Lorsqu'il [La Fontaine] fit imprimer ses fables on connaissait, il est vrai, celles d'Esope et de Phèdre mais personne alors n'avait médité sur le caractère, la forme et le but de l'apologue, sur le style propre à cette espèce de poème, sur la marche qu'il faut donner au dialogue, sur les ornements qui lui conviennent, sur les défauts qui peuvent en détruire l'effet, sur les moyens de porter ce nouveau genre à un plus haut point de perfection.[1]

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Naigeon could have cited a few definitions of the apologue, or fable, in ancient treatises on rhetoric, but really, as he said, La Fontaine did not have any guide or precedent to follow.[2]

Naigeon's expression "ce nouveau genre" raises the question whether the fable in verse can be considered a literary genre. Does it—like an elegy or a satire or an epigram—have certain standard, generic features? La Fontaine handled the fable with great freedom and he set his own stamp upon it. He had no disciples nor successful descendants and thus there is, apart from him, no French fable tradition. Although many critics speak of his fables as representatives of a genre it might be better to think of them as a very personal and flexible literary form.

Whatever term is used for them, the fables possess a certain unity or homogeneity arising from La Fontaine's thoughtful approach to his art, from what Naigeon aptly called his meditation "sur le caractère, la forme et le but de l'apologue." In this essay I shall discuss very briefly several aspects of the poet's quest for an appropriate form. Leaving aside his style and literary sources which have been rather fully explored by other scholars, I shall try to clarify certain neglected points, bringing together La Fontaine's critical ideas and comments on them by some contemporary and later writers.

Although most of the twelve books of fables appeared in two main collections (1668 and 1678–79), their evolution stretched over a longer period of time. About twenty fables were circulated in manuscript to privileged readers as early as 1663. These short pieces, nearly all of them imitations of Phaedrus, were followed by another hundred fables written in the next four or five years. All this material was published in the collection of 1668 (Books I–VI), together with the author's illuminating preface and other reflections on his work in dedicatory passages and prologues. In the course of the next decade some new fables were printed separately from time to time; these and many others were included in the volumes of 1678–79 (Books VII–XI). Book XII, which appeared as *Fables choisies* in 1694, consists of a group of fables published in 1685 and about a dozen others written between 1685 and 1694.

The word *fable* has always had many meanings and this has led to ambiguity and confusion in its use as a literary term. The definitions to be found in seventeenth-century dictionaries include: lie or falsehood, story, fiction in general, the plot of a play or of a narrative poem, a single myth, ancient mythology, and the writings attributed to Aesop. In 1694 the first dictionary of the French Academy gave five entries for *fable,* among them this one for the Aesopic tradition: "Chose feinte, & inventée pour instruire, ou pour divertir. Vieille fable, fable morale, fable mystérieuse, les fables d'Esope, de Phèdre, sous le voile des fables, la moralité des fables." The definition is extremely vague but the various usages make it somewhat

clearer: the fables of Aesop, or Phaedrus, were considered to be pleasing, edifying fictions, usually presenting a moral lesson which might be evident or partially concealed. This was commonplace knowledge and dictionaries did not pursue the matter further. They did not describe the structure or literary characteristics of fables, and they overlooked a technical meaning of the word, the fable as a rhetorical device. These neglected aspects of craftsmanship, both ancient and modern, were of particular interest to La Fontaine.

According to the best early definition, by the rhetorician Theon, an Aesopic fable was a fictitious story picturing a truth.[3] The terms are broad and they embrace many types of material. The story, in prose, could be told in a single sentence or it could be developed at some length as a detailed narration, sometimes with passages in dialogue. It often related an action in which the participants were animals but it did not exclude other characters such as plants, men, and gods. The "truth" could also be of various kinds: advice for a particular person about some problem or situation, a general reflection on life or manners, or a moral which might take the form of a maxim or proverb.

The use of fiction to exemplify a moral observation is a metaphorical or allegorical technique which could be exploited effectively by a speaker or writer who was a good storyteller and who possessed some measure of worldly wit or wisdom. These qualities in Aesop attracted admirers across the centuries, and many legends grew up around him. La Fontaine, a kindred spirit, had great affection for Aesop and all the lore associated with him. In his preface to the collection of 1668 and in his version of Aesop's "biography," appearing in the same book, he naïvely attempted to defend the authenticity of various legends associated with the ancient fabulist. He showed his esteem for Aesop the man and for his fables, throughout his preface and prologues, in many allusions elsewhere, and perhaps most of all in his utilization of Aesopic material—not the Greek texts, to be sure, but many Latin and French translations. Most of these primitive fables have little literary merit but their metaphorical structure (which becomes allegorical if at all sustained) contains a poetic potential which La Fontaine sensed and which became the foundation of his art.

Greek prose fables incidentally served a very practical purpose. They were gathered together in collections, somewhat like a dictionary of proverbs or an anthology of famous quotations, for the use of authors and orators who wanted striking illustrative materials to impress their audiences. For this reason theorists and critics, if they mentioned the fable at all, treated it as a rhetorical device, a means of persuasion.[4] La Fontaine was aware of this practice, he had studied the rules of rhetoricians, and moreover, in his preface of 1668, he cited respected ancient authorities in order to promote the acceptance of his fables. Hence his erudite and sometimes

misleading references to Plato, Socrates, Terence, Horace, the *Rhetoric* of Aristotle, and the *Institutio oratoria* of Quintilian. Aristotle, however, deals with the fable in a chapter (II, 20) on argumentation and proof, calling it a fictitious example, closely related to the parable, to be used when historical or factual examples are not available. Quintilian, similarly (V, xi, 20), brings in fables when speaking of the presentation of evidence and proof in a law suit, along with historical examples and proverbs. These passages probably provide the basis for a puzzling sentence in La Fontaine's preface: "nous voyons que la Vérité a parlé aux hommes par paraboles; et la parabole est-elle autre chose que l'apologue, c'est à dire un exemple fabuleux?"

Although Greek or Roman poets, and notably Horace, occasionally tried their hand at composing fables, it was not until the first century of the Christian era that someone undertook to prepare a whole collection of fables to be read as literature. This was the work of Phaedrus, writing in Latin verse. Without his example La Fontaine might never have conceived the idea of poetic fables in French. He had great admiration for Phaedrus, drew upon him as the principal source for the early manuscript fables and for many others in the volume of 1668, and gave much thought to the critical ideas which Phaedrus had expressed in certain prologues and epilogues.[5] Phaedrus had pointed out rather self-consciously his efforts to improve on Aesop, claiming great originality in revising his sources so as to make the stories artistically effective.

La Fontaine went far beyond Phaedrus, however, in his ambitions as a poet. As he said in presenting the fables in 1668 he wanted to "égayer les narrations"[6] and to introduce "les ornements de la poésie" and "quelques traits [ingenious devices and effects] qui en relevassent le goût." Above all he was seeking what he called "la gaieté" in a definition which has become famous: "Je n'appelle pas gaieté ce qui excite le rire, mais un certain charme, un air agréable, qu'on peut donner à toutes sortes de sujets, même les plus sérieux." His resourcefulness as a stylist and humorist does not concern us here; we mention it because it sometimes interfered with another preoccupation: the desirability of terseness and concision of form.

Ancient fables were generally quite short and Phaedrus often boasted that he had remained faithful to this tradition. In fact he kept the great majority of his pieces within the scope of about ten to fifteen lines, although he allowed a few of them to reach thirty or more lines if the subject merited such development. Should the fable be brief and laconic? How much could it be expanded and adorned? La Fontaine took these basic questions very seriously and discussed them frequently in his collection of 1668. He admitted twice (preface and VI, 1) that he could not match the brevity and simplicity of Phaedrus, adding several excuses to defend what he was doing: the French language was less compact than Latin, a "morale nue" would

be boring unless supported by a well-told story, and his public demanded pleasure and novelty. In practice there is a notable progression in length from the early fables to those of the later part of his career—and not only in length, of course, but in lyricism and all the features of style and composition which added greatly to the complexity of his art.

Some critics were difficult to please. In 1668 La Fontaine faced opposition from people like Patru who clung to the old idea of fables as short compositions in prose. Later on, and even into the eighteenth century, defenders of the classical rules occasionally found fault with the poet's digressive manner and his blending of several themes. The most striking example is that of Houdart de La Motte, a rather perceptive student and writer of fables, who nevertheless criticized the multiplicity of themes in *Les Deux Pigeons* (IX, 2): the travels of one pigeon with all its dangers, the anxieties of the other one, their tender separation, and their joyous reunion at the end.[7] Yet this fable, long and richly textured, was already a favorite among such contemporaries of La Fontaine as Madame de Sévigné, and it has come to be universally cherished as one of his masterpieces. Obviously there were mixed reactions to the author's rather daring efforts to go beyond the traditionally simple form of fables to something less "regular" and less direct.

Another tradition, closely related to singleness of theme, held that fables should be simple little lessons, to be used for the instruction of children or uneducated persons. The ancient view can again be illustrated by Quintilian, who pointed out that fables possessed great appeal and persuasive power for rude, untutored listeners (V, xi, 19). In another passage, dealing with education, Quintilian urged that fables follow the fairy tale in the nursery, with young pupils paraphrasing them in simple language so as to learn elementary notions of composition. French schools in fact adopted this practice very widely, and children were required to imitate or paraphrase such texts when studying ancient languages, usually Phaedrus for Latin and Aesopic material for Greek. La Fontaine himself, like most of his contemporaries, was undoubtedly exposed to this kind of training.[8]

It is hard to establish whether fables were also widely used in the teaching of morality, but their appropriateness for this purpose was generally accepted, at least until the eighteenth century. (D'Alembert in his *Réflexions sur la poésie* said that a young reader could not possibly understand La Fontaine's fables and Rousseau in *Emile* called them a dangerous and corrupting influence.) As for La Fontaine himself, he may have believed, rather naïvely, that he was offering lessons in virtue which would have a wholesome effect upon children. At least he took advantage of the opportunity to dedicate his collection of 1668 to the six-year-old heir to the French throne, and, at the end of his career, he offered Book XII to another young prince, the Duke of Burgundy.

In the preface and dedication of 1668 La Fontaine went to extraordinary lengths in asserting that his fables could provide children with "des réflexions sérieuses," "des vérités importantes," even practical information about the characteristics of wild animals, and in general a foundation for improving "le jugement et les mœurs." In arguing his case he perhaps had in mind Quintilian's discussion of historical and fictitious *exempla.* At least he chose these devices and compared their pedagogical value in conveying a lesson in prudence, "il faut considérer en toute chose la fin." Suppose, he said, that a teacher attempted to make this advice more striking by means of an illustration taken from history, such as the rash campaign of Crassus against the Parthians, this would not make much impression on a childish mind. But one of his own fables, he said, relating the story of *Le Renard et le Bouc* (III, 5), would appeal to a young reader because of its conformity with "la petitesse de son esprit" and hence would impart the same lesson far more effectively. He apparently dwelled at such length on these theories because of the need to please and flatter the royal family but they probably had little effect upon his literary intentions. He may have had children in mind in composing some of the shorter fables in Books I–VI and he included several compliments for his patron in Book XII. But most of the time he was undoubtedly writing for a mature and sophisticated audience, an audience which demanded, as he said, "de la nouveauté et de la gaieté" and could appreciate the implications often lurking behind the story and the obvious moral.

Some critics, aware of the subtle and frequently elliptical nature of fables, believed that they could be read profitably not only by children but by adults as well. One discussion of this deserves special mention because it occurs in a book which La Fontaine cherished and which he often imitated rather closely. The book was the first French translation of Phaedrus, which Le Maître de Sacy brought out in 1647. The translator presented the Latin and French texts on facing pages with the aim of providing pupils in school with reading and composition materials. He also expurgated a few daring expressions and inserted additional maxims to make his work more edifying. But he admitted in his Foreword that young students would be interested only in the stories and superficial features of the fables, in what he called "l'écorce et l'extérieur." One had to be a man of maturity, even an "homme sage," to appreciate fully "les instructions importantes qui sont cachées avec tant de grâce et tant d'adresse dans les replis de ces fables."[9] La Fontaine probably agreed with this view; it seems to be echoed throughout the preface of 1668, in his comments on Phaedrus, in his claim for a substantial hidden meaning in his fables—"un sens très solide" which goes deeper than childish appearances—and in his uncertainty concerning the position and value of overt moral lessons.

Later writers continued to ponder the relative importance of the moral

and the narrative in fables. When Furetière brought out his *Fables morales et nouvelles* in 1671 he expressed the opinion that "la bonne Fable doit porter en elle mesme sa Moralité" but he added that he has nevertheless attached a formal lesson "pour instruire le peuple. Les habiles peuvent sauter pardessus, & ne les point lire."[10] Almost fifty years later Houdart de La Motte said virtually the same thing: instruction should be disguised allegorically within the story itself but, for practical purposes, to reach every type of reader, it is normally spelled out in a separate lesson. One of his comments provides a thoughtful explanation of the aesthetic pleasure to be found in fable allegories: "L'esprit . . . aime à voir plusieurs choses à la fois, & en distinguer les rapports . . . & en apercevant ce qui était couvert de quelque voile, il croit en quelque sorte créer ce qu'on lui cachoit."[11] Another eighteenth-century theorist, Rémond de Saint-Mard, approached the problem differently but reached similar conclusions. First he introduced some moralizing reflections on flattery, simply to show how dull they were, whether for children or adults. Then he quoted La Fontaine's *Le Corbeau et le Renard* (I, 2) to prove that a fable could teach the same ideas very pleasantly. Like La Motte he said that the reader's satisfaction comes from the discovery of allegorical meanings: "L'allégorie . . . a l'avantage de nous faire entendre une chose dans le temps qu'elle nous en présente une autre; et au moyen de cette petite supercherie qu'elle nous fait, elle donne à notre esprit un exercice doux qui le réjouit."[12]

As becomes clear from these commentaries, the goal of fables—whether to please a young or a mature audience—was intimately related to the question of multiple meanings. Could the writer of a fable convey two or more messages simultaneously, one of them quite simple and manifest, and another, or others, which might be different and also more subtle and more hidden? La Fontaine soon learned to avail himself of this liberty through sly personal interventions and other devices. But his practice as an artist outdistanced his expressions of literary theory. He came closest to the idea of plural, hence ambiguous, interpretations in the prologue of Book VI with the lines "Les fables ne sont pas ce qu'elle semblent être" and "Le conte fait passer le précepte avec lui." This prologue, however, viewed in context with the pair of fables which it introduces, deals less with the concept of a poetic form than with certain broad featues of classical doctrine: imitation of ancient sources and the need to "instruire et plaire."

Still another source of confusion stood in the way of a clear definition of the form and function of fables, a tendency to compare them or to identify them with other types of literary compositions. Short fables, when accompanied by an engraved illustration, had much in common with moralizing emblems and were in fact often published in emblem books. This resemblance was described in an early treatise by Claude Ménestrier in 1662 and it has been studied in some detail by modern scholars, notably

Georges Couton.[13] La Fontaine was familiar with emblem books, drew upon them occasionally as source material, and may have been guided by their format and use of illustrations in his fables of 1668. But he did not mention any connection between fables and emblems, presumably because he was steeped in the older traditions of Aesop and Phaedrus and found in them the basis for nearly all his theories.

Another literary form sometimes associated with the fable was the epic poem. Curiously, a kinship was felt to exist between the two genres and particularly between Aesop and Homer. These two legendary figures were often coupled because of their remoteness in antiquity and because they seemed to be the original springs from which Greek literature flowed. La Fontaine venerated them both and mentioned them together on several occasions (sometimes adding the name of Vergil, whom he cherished almost as much as Homer). In presenting his version of *La Vie d'Esope* in 1668 his starting point was Homer and Aesop, the lack of exact biographical information on these two great men, and the reasons why they deserve to be admired.

> Car Homere n'est pas seulement le père des dieux, c'est aussi celui des bons poètes. Quant à Esope, il me semble qu'on le devait mettre au nombre des sages dont la Grèce s'est tant vantée, lui qui enseignait la véritable sagesse, et qui l'enseignait avec bien plus d'art que ceux qui en donnent des définitions et des règles.

In the one he saw the father of mythology and poetry, in the other the first and most persuasive teacher of wisdom or morality.

The fable and the epic shared certain characteristics in the eyes of literary theorists. The vagueness of the word *fable*, meaning variously plot, fiction, or mythology, perhaps contributed to the idea that all narrative works were closely related. In classical literary doctrine the novel or romance had the same technical rules as the heroic poem except for the fact that one was written in prose and the other in verse.[14] No rules existed for the Aesopic fable, as we have seen, but La Fontaine and others sometimes called it an animal epic or an epic in miniature. This comparison was developed in detail in a treatise which Père Le Bossu published in 1675.[15]

Le Bossu believed that poetry should be educational and that epic poets should first choose a truth to teach, then devise an appropriate story (*une fable*) to illustrate the lesson allegorically. In his seventh chapter, "Manière de faire une Fable," he offers an example: suppose that your purpose is to exhort brothers to remain loyal to one another and to avoid the quarrels which might divide the family and cause the loss of their property (p. 37). This instruction becomes a specific type of "fable" when you narrate events and assign names to the characters. "Esope leur donne les noms de Bêtes. Deux Chiens, dit-il, mis pour la garde d'un troupeau, se battent, & le laissent sans défense au Loup, qui en enlève ce qui lui plaît" (p. 38). Or the names of kings and heroes may be used, with the same subject

developed as an epic poem. "La Fable de l'Iliade, au fond, n'est autre chose que celle que je viens de proposer" (p. 43). Le Bossu continues his discussion in Chapter IX, "Comparaison de la Fable de l'Iliade avec celle d'Esope." Aesop and Homer have taught the same lesson, he says, and they have employed, basically, the same fiction. He adds that the two kinds of "fable" exhibit, in practice, many obvious differences beside their cast of characters. Unlike the stories of Aesop, epic poems are massive and complex, amplified by descriptions, long speeches, subplots, and material from mythology. Also they are necessarily written in verse and, as befits kings and gods, their tone is serious and elevated.

La Fontaine may not have known the theories of Le Bossu but he expressed a similar idea in the important prologue to Book V, written not long before the date of publication in 1668. He speaks with evident satisfaction of his stylistic accomplishment in the fables, and also of their serious moral value:

> Comme la force est un point
> Dont je ne me pique point,
> Je tâche d'y tourner le vice en ridicule,
> Ne pouvant l'attaquer avec des bras d'Hercule.

This is one of his many admissions that he had no talent for writing works on an epic scale. He then cites several of his fables—doubtless well received already by friends who had seen them in manuscript—and stresses their wide-ranging moral applications:

> Tantôt je peins en un récit
> La sotte vanité jointe avecque l'envie,
> Deux pivots sur qui roule notre vie.

Thus his work can be called "Une ample comédie à cent actes divers,/Et dont la scène est l'univers." The formula is brilliant but often misunderstood. He is not referring to the theatrical or humorous qualities of his art, but rather to its seriousness of purpose. He is boasting that his collection of fables, like comedy, portrays a broad spectrum of life and exercises a corrective social influence. And the lines which follow—"Hommes, dieux, animaux, tout y fait quelque rôle,/Jupiter comme un autre"—suggest that epic poetry was not absent from his mind. These themes occur again in the rhymed dedication to the Dauphin at the head of his book, a brief apologetic poem which opens with this amusing epic flourish: "Je chante les héros dont Esope est le père."

La Fontaine's fables teem with reminiscences of Homer and Vergil, and also with passages, both light and serious, which employ the technical devices of epic style. Our poet liked to call attention to this practice but he did not bother to justify it in any detail. Had he wished to, he might have pointed to the example of Phaedrus, who sometimes did the same thing. The most interesting case is the piece *Poeta* which Phaedrus included

among his fables (IV, 7) and which served as the direct source of La Fontaine's *Contre ceux qui ont le goût difficile* (II, 1). The Roman fabulist objects to the reproaches of a snobbish critic and tries to mollify him by producing a sample of elevated, tragic style—eleven lines imitating a passage in the *Medea* of Euripides. But the critic finds fault with this too and the poet exclaims that some people are impossible to please.

La Fontaine's version of the subject is considerably longer and more complex. Even if he had been born an epic poet, he says, he would have preferred to devote his gifts to the stories of Aesop, for which he claims to have invented a "langage nouveau." The fussy listener complains that he is taking too much credit for "cinq ou six contes d'enfant" and the author attempts to satisfy him with some lines in the epic manner, a narrative based on events in the *Iliad.* But the critic disapproves of this "si haut style," whereupon the poet pitches his voice a little lower, introducing some lovesick shepherds in an eclogue. He is interrupted again, this time because of an imperfect rhyme, and he concludes, like Phaedrus, with an exasperated comment on the over-fastidious tastes of certain readers. It is characteristic of La Fontaine that he went far beyond Phaedrus, not only in this demonstration of stylistic ability but in his general concept of the fable as a vehicle offering many possible variations of structure and tonality.

This survey of La Fontaine's theories on the composition of fables has dealt exclusively with the collection of 1668. He had less to say about his later fables and his remarks about them can be treated rather briefly. Books VII–XI, which appeared in four small volumes in the course of 1678–79, contain some of the great masterpieces of La Fontaine's mature years. The collection was accompanied by a terse "Avertissement," only a page in length, and by a rhymed dedication, not much longer, to the most prestigious woman at the royal court, Madame de Montespan. In view of this patronage for his book it is quite natural that the poet says nothing about writing for the benefit of childish readers. He also avoided all the technical questions which had preoccupied him ten years earlier, such as his plea in favor of poetry over prose, his references to ancient authorities, and his hesitancy in the handling of moral lessons. The "Avertissement" announces, with very little explanation, "un air et un tour un peu différent" in the new fables: fewer "traits familiers" and more of "d'autres enrichissements," and greater length for certain pieces when it seemed appropriate to develop "les circonstances de ces récits." The poet also calls attention to his borrowing from "Pilpay, sage Indien" and from other storytellers whom he does not bother to name. He summarizes his innovations in a sentence which seems to embrace both style and structure: "Enfin j'ai tâché de mettre en ces deux dernières parties toute la diversité dont j'étais capable." A close examination of the poems could clarify and support this brief statement of his intentions. La Fontaine did not often

abandon the tradition of Aesop and Phaedrus but he modified it, enlarged it, and introduced a number of new themes ranging from sharp political satire to philosophical meditation on the nature of animals and men.

The dedication in verse to Madame de Montespan (who is called Olympe) is mainly an ingenious exercise in gallantry which compares the beauty of fables to that of a graceful goddess. La Fontaine dwells first on the divine origin of the apologue (a theme recalled from the preface of 1668), then on the magical power of "ce bel art":

> C'est proprement un charme: il rend l'âme attentive,
> Ou plutôt il la tient captive,
> Nous attachant à des récits
> Qui mènent à son gré les cœurs et les esprits.

These lines are vague; they seem to refer not to effective moral teaching but rather to a spell or enchantment which enables the poet to communicate a variety of feelings and ideas. La Fontaine appears to be saying that fables, far from being rigid or restrictive, allow him to express his personality freely and fully. There is only a pretense of modesty in the expression he uses to describe his work, "les jeux où mon esprit s'amuse," and toward the end of his dedication he ventures a confident claim that his fables will make him immortal.

One poem from the collection, the *Discours à Monsieur de la Rochefoucauld* (X, 14), deserves to be singled out as an expression of theory. Not really a fable, it pays tribute to the writer of maxims and presents a philosophical argument. The poet also includes a reflection on his art which brings together two ideas long associated with fables: brevity and hidden meanings. The shortest works are always best, La Fontaine says, and he adds:

> En cela j'ai pour guide
> Tous les maîtres de l'art, et tiens qu'il faut laisser
> Dans les plus beaux sujets quelque chose à penser.

He had made the same points in 1668, but not very convincingly, respectfully following conventions inherited from Aesop. Here his emphasis is different. Instead of advocating brevity for its own sake—and the fables of this collection reach to much greater length than his earlier ones—he appears to say that he makes rigorous choices and leaves certain things unsaid, hoping to kindle the imagination of the reader. He has assimilated fable materials to the classical ideal of understatement and suggestion.

Book IX opens with a prologue and a short epilogue follows Book XI. But these, like the dedicatory epistle introducing the volume now known as Book XII, have nothing to add concerning the composition of fables. In fact all of these documents, and particularly the last one addressed again to a child, the eleven-year-old grandson of Louis XIV, tend to repeat statements made many years earlier. One gains the impression that La

Fontaine, having mastered all the technical problems of his art, no longer needed to explain and defend them.

From La Fontaine's scattered and unsystematic observations it can be concluded that he had only limited competence as a builder of literary theories. He made no attempt to draw up a coherent doctrine. On the other hand he gave much thought to problems of form and studied earlier commentators on fables for whatever advice he could find. Two writers, Quintilian and Phaedrus, were particularly useful to him, and his borrowings incidentally helped to prolong their influence well into the eighteenth century. As he went about evolving a new poetic form he had to deal with the very practical matters of finding patrons, writing dedications, and winning the approval of readers. There is an element of salesmanship in the collection of 1668 which detracts from the value and credibility of some of the author's critical comments. As a form the fable presented special difficulties because of its humble, non-literary origins. It had no identity of its own and was nearly always defined in relation to something else, a rhetorical device, a lesson for children, even an epic poem. Perhaps, as it turned out, this lack of formal design gave our poet unusual freedom of movement and expression. Although he reflected on rules and theories he had no compelling reason to follow them. In the invention of poetic fables he was guided most of all by his own instinct and sureness of taste, by his own creative ability.

NOTES

1. Jacques-André Naigeon, *Eloge de La Fontaine* (Bouillon: Société Typographique, 1775), p. 41. The most pertinent studies are my own *Young La Fontaine* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1952, reprinted 1970 by AMS Press, New York) and these more recent works: Odette de Mourgues, *O Muse, fuyante proie: essai sur la poésie de La Fontaine* (Paris: José Corti, 1962); Renée Kohn, *Le Goût de La Fontaine* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1962); René Jasinski, *La Fontaine et le premier recueil des Fables,* 2 vols. (Paris: Nizet, 1965–66); Jean Dominique Biard, *The Style of La Fontaine's Fables* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1966); and Jean-Pierre Collinet, *Le Monde littéraire de La Fontaine* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1970). I am indebted to the American Philosophical Society for a grant which aided my research.

2. There is no discussion of the fable in René Bray's exhaustive treatise, *La Formation de la doctrine classique en France* (Paris: Hachette, 1927).

3. For further details see Professor Ben E. Perry's excellent Introduction to his edition, *Babrius and Phaedrus,* in the Loeb Classical Library (London, England and Cambridge, Massachusetts: Heinemann and Harvard University Press, 1965).

4. This may be the main reason, as Biard has suggested (op. cit., p. xv), why Boileau did not include the fable among the genres which he discussed in his *Art poétique.* The same omission can be noted in Rapin's *Réflexions sur la Poétique d'Aristote* (1673), one of Boileau's most important sources.

5. The influence of Phaedrus, particularly as a source for certain fables, has received considerable attention. See *Young La Fontaine,* pp. 178–188, and Geneviève Delassault,

"Le Maître de Sacy et La Fontaine traducteurs de Phèdre," *Revue des Sciences Humaines,* 68: 281–294 (1952).

6. Here La Fontaine names Quintilian as his authority, but the *narratio* of Quintilian (IV, ii) is a term in legal rhetoric. It is that part of a courtroom oration which may be called the statement of facts; it falls between the exordium and the proof and is intended to provide background information for the judge or jury.

7. See La Motte's "Discours de la Fable," pp. xix ff, in his *Fables Nouvelles* (Paris: Grégoire Dupuis, 1719). His objections were answered by other critics, starting with Chamfort and Saint-Marc Girardin. This is treated in detail in the Régnier edition of La Fontaine's *Oeuvres* (Paris: Hachette, 1883–1897), II, 358–361.

8. Some information on this use of fables can be found in the brief but important monograph by Georges Couton, *La Poétique des Fables* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1957).

9. *Les Fables de Phèdre, affranchy d'Auguste* . . . (Paris: Veuve Martin Durand, 1647), "Au lecteur."

10. Antoine Furetière, *Fables morales et nouvelles* (Paris: Claude Barbin, 1671), "Au lecteur."

11. La Motte, op. cit., "Discours sur la fable," p. xiv.

12. Toussaint Rémond de Saint-Mard, "Sur la fable," in his *Réflexions sur la poésie en général, sur la fable* . . . (The Hague: Rogissart et Soeurs, 1734), p. 110. See also César Du Marsais who discusses Aesopic fables in his chapter on allegory in *Des Tropes* (Paris: Veuve Brocas, 1730), pp. 143–153.

13. See *Young La Fontaine,* Georges Couton, op. cit., and Claude-François Ménestrier, *L'Art des emblèmes,* 2nd ed. (Paris: La Caille, 1674). In this greatly enlarged edition Ménestrier took some examples from La Fontaine (pp. 27–29), treating as emblems *Les Deux Mulets* (I, 4) and the first four lines of *L'Astrologue qui se laisse tomber dans un puits* (II, 13).

14. René Bray, op. cit., pp. 336–349.

15. René Le Bossu, *Traité du poème épique.* My references are based on the second edition (Paris: André Pralard, 1677).